

1697

# HINDSIGHT

## Dedicated to Beginning

By Jody Morgan

The Old Burial Ground on Chestnut Street will come alive with laughter as enthusiastic scouts and marching band members fall into formation for the annual Duxbury Memorial Day Parade on Monday. Although a lack of reverence for the site might be judged from the antics of young acrobats tumbling among the gravestones and junior gymnasts balancing on the rails, the freedom of expression sought by the first settlers interred beneath is evidently enjoyed by the latest generation to benefit from their labors.

A bronze plaque proudly proclaims this ground "AMERICA'S OLDEST MAINTAINED CEMETERY." Dedicated by the American Cemetery Association in 1977, the plaque fails to note the number of years this land went untended after the "new" Mayflower Cemetery was laid out in 1787.

In an age generally reputed to have been less disrespectful than our own, boys used the overgrown lot as a playground. Dorothy Wentworth notes in "Settlement and Growth of Duxbury 1628-1870" that one lad claimed to have been able to cross the yard by jumping from stone to stone without once touching a toe to the ground in 1830.

Clearly, the stones standing at the height of the shipbuilding era far outnumbered the scattered clusters still visible today. Only 120 marked graves could be discerned by the close of the 19th century, when interest in maintaining Duxbury's first burial ground

was reawakened.

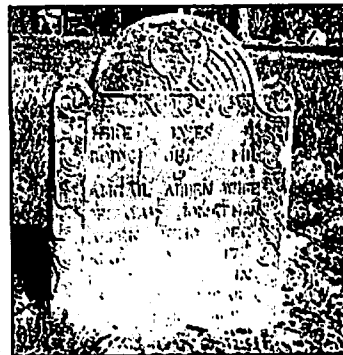
"For a great many years the old cemetery was neglected. There were no fences around it and roaming cattle strayed over it." Thus the Reverend E.J.V. Huiginn describes in "The Graves of Myles Standish and Other Pilgrims" the state of the Pilgrim burial ground before the Duxbury Rural Society rebuilt the fences, cleared the weeds and planted shrubs in 1886.

The oldest existing marker in the cemetery was on an extended leave of absence when the Rural Society began uncovering the ancient stones. Disturbed by the condition of the memorials dedicated to his ancestors, Ezra Weston, son of the shipping magnate, had begun to remove some of the markers for restoration before his death in 1852. He had some stones cleaned and others reset.

Finding a broken slate in memory of Jonathan Alden, son of the Mayflower passenger, lying on the ground, and

ancestral history along with the family home on Powder Point, known to us as the King Caesar House.

In 1880, when Alden Weston died, his heirs discovered this antique artifact and



Probing the ground near Abigail Alden's marker, Laurence Bradford unearthed the base of the broken memorial to her husband.

Photos by Jody Morgan

passed it along to his cousin, Miss Lucia A. Bradford, Captain Gershom Bradford's daughter. Fearing the proper place to reinstate the stone could not be found, Lucia considered donating it to Pilgrim Hall. Meanwhile, the missing memorial rested in her home.

After visiting the residences of living relatives for half a century, Jonathan Alden's gravestone returned to its original post amongst the departed Alden kindred in 1895. Lucia's nephew, Laurence Bradford, had found Jonathan Alden's broken marker propped in a corner of the parlor when her house came into his possession.

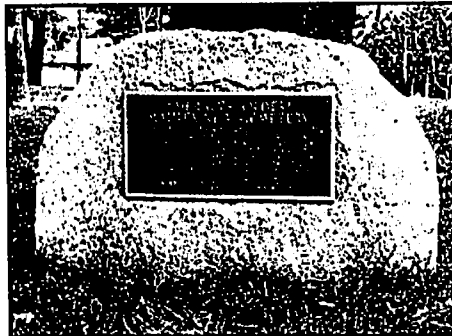
Working his way back and forth across the one-and-one-quarter-acre graveyard, Laurence located the well-preserved monument to the memory of Jonathan's wife,

Abigail, who died at the age of 81, in 1725. Bradford probed the adjacent ground, digging up every stone he encountered. At last, he unearthed a slab that fit the long-absent piece precisely. Reset in a marble frame, Jonathan Alden's 1697 marker is the oldest original dated headstone in the cemetery.

Made of imported Welsh slate like the few other existing stones in New England dated earlier than 1700, the Alden memorial probably represented a significant expenditure in its day. Gravestones of this period originally stood about one foot above the soil with another half a foot beneath the dirt. As a visitor to the ancient cemetery can clearly see, a few centuries of New England weather have obliterated many inscriptions. Some stones are buried and others are broken.

However, as excavations done by the Duxbury Rural Society in 1889 and reopened in 1891 by Reverend Huiginn proved, burials in the cemetery go back at least to the time of Myles Standish's will, in which he asks to be buried beside his daughter, Lora, and daughter-in-law, Mary Dingley Standish, who died in 1654. Evidence suggests that most, if not all, of Duxbury's first European residents were interred somewhere within this yard.

Maintained once more and returned to a dignified state of respectful silence for most of the year, the Myles Standish Burying Ground is honored in an equally appropriate, if less orthodox, fashion each Memorial Day by the boisterous exhibitions of the town's younger generation as they gather for the annual celebration of the lives of Duxbury's departed soldiers and citizens. In this place dedicated to settlers intent on beginning a better life for their children, our children demonstrate the success of the Mayflower adventure.



A bronze plaque proclaims the Myles Standish Burying Ground "AMERICA'S OLDEST MAINTAINED CEMETERY."

unable to locate the burial site, Ezra, an Alden descendant himself, took it home. Upon Ezra's death, his brother, Alden Weston, acquired the slice of